



States easing virus restrictions despite experts' warnings

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH
and TAMMY WEBBER
Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. (AP) — With the U.S. vaccination drive picking up speed and a third formula on the way, states eager to reopen for business are easing coronavirus restrictions despite warnings from health experts that the outbreak is far from over and that moving too quickly could prolong the misery.

Massachusetts on Monday made it much easier to grab dinner and a show. In Missouri, where individual communities get to make the rules, the two biggest metropolitan areas — St. Louis and Kansas City — are relaxing some measures.

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EASE UP



Employees with the McKesson Corporation scan a box of the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine while filling an order at their shipping facility in Shepherdsville, Ky., Monday, March 1, 2021.

Associated Press



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States easing virus restrictions despite experts' warnings

Continued from Front

Iowa's governor recently lifted mask requirements and limits on the number of people allowed in bars and restaurants, while the town of Lawrence, home to the University of Kansas, now lets establishments stay open until midnight.

Mike Lee, who owns Trezo Mare Restaurant & Lounge in Kansas City, said he hopes increased vaccine access, combined with warmer weather, will improve business.

"I think that people are excited to put this past them and be able to start to get back to their ways of doing things," Lee said.

The push to reopen comes as COVID-19 vaccine shipments to the states are ramping up. Nearly 20% of the nation's adults — or over 50 million people — have received at least one dose of vaccine, and 10% have been fully inoculated 2 1/2 months into the campaign to snuff out the virus, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Johnson & Johnson shipped out nearly 4 million doses of its newly authorized, one-shot COVID-19 vaccine Sunday night to be delivered to states for use starting on Tuesday. The company will deliver about 16 million more doses by the end of March and a total of 100 million by the end of June.

That adds to the supply being distributed by Pfizer and Moderna and should help the nation amass enough doses by midsummer to vaccinate all adults. The White House is encouraging Americans to take the first dose available to them, regardless of manufacturer.



An employee with the McKesson Corporation packs a box of the Johnson and Johnson COVID-19 vaccine into a cooler for shipping from their facility in Shepherdsville, Ky., Monday, March 1, 2021. Associated Press

In New York City, where limited indoor dining has resumed, officials said the J&J vaccine will help the city to inoculate millions more people by summer, including through door-to-door vaccinations of homebound senior citizens. But the efforts come with strong warnings from health officials against reopening too quickly, as worrisome coronavirus variants spread.

On Monday, the head of the CDC, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, urgently warned state officials and ordinary Americans not to let down their guard, saying she is "really worried about reports that more states are rolling back the exact public health measures that we have recommended."

"I remain deeply concerned about a potential shift in the trajectory of the pandemic," she said. "We stand to completely lose the hard-earned ground

that we have gained." Cases and hospitalizations have plunged since the end of January, and deaths have also dropped sharply, but they are still running at dangerously high levels and have even risen slightly over the past several days. "We cannot be resigned to 70,000 cases a day and 2,000 daily deaths," Walensky said.

Overall, the outbreak has killed more than a half-million Americans. The vaccine already is contributing to a decrease in severe cases and deaths among older people, and is "quickly becoming a bigger contributor" nationally, Justin Lessler, an expert in infectious diseases at Johns Hopkins University, said in an email.

"I suspect we will see it overtake natural infection as the biggest driver of immunity late spring earliest, more likely midsummer," Lessler said.

Dr. Amesh Adalja, an infectious disease specialist at Johns Hopkins University, said he believes states and cities have leeway to ease some restrictions because hospitals no longer are at capacity in most communities.

But "I do think that masks are likely going to need to be kept in place for some time until we get more of our vulnerable populations vaccinated," he said.

"It is important for restaurants who are increasing their capacity to remember that we are still in a pandemic and to continue to follow some of those rules," Adalja said.

The Biden administration wants to see all three vaccines distributed evenly, while also acknowledging that the easy-to-handle J&J vaccine will be used in pop-up mobile sites and locations without freezer storage capacity.

States are hoping that the

surging vaccine supply will help tamp down new infections.

In Massachusetts, Gov. Charlie Baker lifted restaurant capacity limits entirely. Theaters can open at 50% capacity, with a maximum of 500 people.

And capacity limits across all businesses have been raised to 50%.

Las Vegas on Monday became the latest of the nation's largest school districts to return children to classrooms. Pre-K children to third graders will go back two days a week, with other grades to be phased in by early April.

And in California, Gov. Gavin Newsom and legislative leaders reached an agreement aimed at getting most children back in classrooms by the end of March. Under the deal announced Monday, school districts could receive up to \$6.6 billion if they reopen by March 31.

The U.S. ranks fourth in the world, behind Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Britain, in the number of doses administered relative to the population, according to data compiled by the University of Oxford.

President Joe Biden fell well short of his goal of setting up 100 new federally operated mass-vaccination sites by the end of February, with just seven up and running.

White House vaccination coordinator Jeff Zients also acknowledged that scheduling of vaccination appointments "remains too difficult in too many places."

But he said the White House is working with states to improve scheduling systems and is exploring federal support for call centers to make it easier for people to get appointments. □

Minimum wage hike all but dead in big COVID relief bill

By ALAN FRAM

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democrats' efforts to include a minimum wage increase in their \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill seemed all but dead Monday as Senate leaders prepared to begin debate on their own version of the House-passed aid package.

Top Democrats abandoned a potential amendment threatening tax increases on big companies that don't boost workers' pay to certain levels, Senate aides said. Four days after the chamber's parliamentarian said Senate rules forbid inclusion of a straight-out minimum wage increase in the relief measure, Democrats seemed to have exhausted their most realistic options for quickly salvaging the pay hike.

"At this moment, we may not have path, but I hope we can find one" for pushing the federal pay floor to \$15 an hour, said No. 2 Senate Democratic leader Richard Durbin of Illinois.

Senate Democrats hope to unveil their version of the broad relief package and begin debate as early as Wednesday. Congressional leaders want to send President Joe Biden the legislation combating the pandemic and bolstering the economy by March 14, the date emergency jobless benefits that lawmakers approved in December



Activists appeal for a \$15 minimum wage near the Capitol in Washington, Thursday, Feb. 25, 2021. Associated Press

expire.

The bill is Biden's biggest early legislative priority. It looms as an initial test of his ability to unite Democrats in the Senate — where the party has no votes to spare — and risks lasting damage to his influence should he fail. Republicans are strongly against the legislation and could well oppose it unanimously, as House GOP lawmakers did when that chamber approved the bill early Saturday.

Biden discussed the relief bill Monday in a virtual meeting with nine Senate Democrats, including Joe Manchin of West Virginia, an opponent of the \$15 hourly target. A White

House statement said the group was "united in the goal of quickly passing a significant package that reflects the scope of the challenges our country is facing."

The Senate is divided 50-50 between the parties, with Vice President Kamala Harris able to cast only tie-breaking votes. Under streamlined rules the Democrats are using, they can approve the legislation with just 51 votes.

The overall bill would provide \$1,400 payments to individuals plus hundreds of billions of dollars for schools and colleges, COVID-19 vaccines and testing, mass transit systems, renters and

small businesses. It also has money for child care, tax breaks for families with children and states willing to expand Medicaid coverage for low-income residents.

Democrats are considering several changes in the House measure, but they seem modest compared to dropping the minimum wage increase. One top aide said the bill the Senate initially debates won't have the minimum wage provision in it, saying the language would have pushed the bill over budget-mandated spending limits, violating Senate rules.

Senate Democrats may reshape the \$350 billion the

bill provides for state and local governments. They also might extend its fresh round of emergency unemployment benefits, which would be \$400 weekly, through September instead of August, as the House approved.

The parliamentarian's interpretation of Senate rules could force other changes as well. These might include dropping or altering provisions in the House bill providing billions of dollars to help some struggling pension plans and to help people who've lost jobs afford health insurance.

The House-approved minimum wage language would gradually raise the federal floor to \$15 an hour by 2025, more than double the \$7.25 in place since 2009.

After the parliamentarian said that provision would have to be deleted, Sens. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., and Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said they were working on plans to increase taxes on large corporations that don't meet certain levels for workers' pay. Sanders is chief Senate sponsor of the \$15 plan, while Wyden is chair of the tax-writing Senate Finance Committee. But three Senate aides, speaking on condition of anonymity to describe internal discussions, said Monday that party leaders were dropping those proposals. □

W.Va. governor agrees to live in government seat, ending case

By JOHN RABY

Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP)

— West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice has agreed to live in the seat of state government in Charleston, ending a long-running challenge over his residency.

A Kanawha County judge Monday signed an order dismissing a 2018 lawsuit filed by a former state lawmaker.

Through his attorney, Justice said he intends to reside in Charleston "consistent with the definition of 'reside' in the Supreme Court of Appeals' opinion,"

according to the dismissal order signed by Senior Status Circuit Judge Dan O'Hanlon.

"The parties agree that Respondent's voluntary agreement to reside at the seat of government within the meaning of the Constitution renders this case moot and that the case should be dismissed," O'Hanlon wrote.

In allowing the lawsuit to proceed in November, the state Supreme Court rejected arguments from Justice that the courts could not force him to live in the state capital.

The challenge has been a thorn in the side of Justice, a two-term governor who defended living in Lewisburg even though the state constitution says the governor "shall reside at the seat of government" in Charleston. The justices wrote that courts had the right to compel the Republican governor to comply with the constitution.

Justice's lawyers had appealed to the Supreme Court after the lower court declined to throw out the case. Democratic Del. Isaac Sponaugle brought the suit after bipartisan criti-



West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice speaks during the State of the State Address in the House Chambers of the West Virginia State Capitol Building in Charleston, W.Va., on Wednesday, Feb. 10, 2021. Associated Press

cism that Justice lived 100 (160 kilometers) miles away

from Charleston, near his resort, The Greenbrier. □

Heavy rains lead to rescues, road closures in Appalachia

By **JOHN RABY** and **REBECCA REYNOLDS**

Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — Kentucky firefighter Eddie Stacy was turning his fire truck around in the dark while responding to storm damage when he noticed a tiny light coming from the flooded Red River.

It was a cellphone a woman was waving from a car inundated with water that was rising by the minute.

Stacy and other members of the Hazel Green Fire Department sprang into action Sunday night, pulling five people from the car where water was up to the dashboard. Among those rescued were a 17-month-old boy and a woman who appeared to be having a seizure, Stacy said in a telephone interview Monday.

"We don't do too much training on this water rescue," Stacy said. "Instinct, it just kicks in."

Heavy thunderstorms pounded parts of Appalachia on Sunday and Monday, sending rivers out of their banks and leading to multiple water rescues, mudslides, road closures and power outages, officials said.

Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear declared a state of emergency Monday due to heavy rainfall across the state.

"We are acting swiftly to ensure the safety and security of Kentucky families and to get the needed



Catherine Castle stands on the porch of her home in downtown Paintsville, Ky., as floodwaters approach on Monday, March 1, 2021.

Associated Press

help to our communities," he said in a statement. He said a total of 13 counties and cities had declared states of emergency and the Kentucky National Guard was activated and was assisting with high water emergencies.

Stacy was part of a storm-response unit cutting down a tree that had fallen onto a road in Wolfe County, Kentucky, about 75 miles (120 kilometers) southeast of Lexington. But a mudslide started and Stacy was forced to move his firetruck. As he was turning around, Stacy noticed something in the floodwaters just down the road — a woman sitting on a stalled car's door

window, waving her cellphone flashlight and yelling for help.

"Nobody could hear from where she was," Stacy said. "That little flashlight when I was driving down the road just caught my attention. It was God, I tell you. It was God to have me in that place where I was supposed to be."

Stacy attached a 100-foot (30-meter) rope to the truck and himself and helped retrieve the car's occupants. Wolfe County Sheriff Chris Carson used a front-end loader to lift out the woman who had the seizure. The car's occupants were brought to the nearby fire station to be checked out

by emergency technicians. The woman with the seizure eventually recovered, Stacy said.

A similar rescue occurred in central Tennessee, where four adults and an infant were removed from a partially submerged truck that slid off a water-covered bridge in DeKalb County, news outlets reported. In addition, a child was injured in Nashville when he tripped over a downed power line while playing outside, officials said.

In Lee County, Kentucky, some homes in Beattyville were evacuated Monday. County Judge-Executive Chuck Caudill told WYMT-TV that rescue crews used

county dump trucks to help people escape their homes.

In Magoffin County, Kentucky, the Salyersville Nursing and Rehabilitation center was among places evacuated Sunday. The facility decided to evacuate residents to assure they remain safe, CEO Joshua L. Calhoun said in a statement to WYMT. He said residents were taken to either a middle school or a hospital. "While we do not have any water in the facility at this time and it is still accessible, due to the risk of flooding we made the decision to relocate," he said. Severe or moderate flooding was forecast Monday on several rivers in West Virginia and eastern Kentucky, including different locations along the Kentucky River southeast of Lexington, the National Weather Service said.

In West Virginia, flooding hit some areas that were ravaged by power outages from ice storms last month. Floodwaters inundated roads in more than a dozen counties, highways officials said.

The National Guard assisted with some evacuations Sunday night in the Dunlow area of Wayne County. And about a dozen people had to be assisted at a church in the Kanawha County community of Cross Lanes on Monday after high water cut off access to a road, WCHS-TV reported. □

Nonprofit leader takes over as National Spelling Bee chief



In this May 28, 2019 file photo, the Scripps National Spelling Bee trophy sits in front of competitors in Oxon Hill, Md.

Associated Press

By **BEN NUCKOLS**
Associated Press

Breaking from a tradition of being led by former con-

tants, the Scripps National Spelling Bee has hired a nonprofit leader with no history in the competition as its executive director, signaling a new era for the nearly century-old showcase for the top spellers in the English language.

Cincinnati-based Scripps announced Monday that J. Michael Durnil will take over immediately as bee director. He replaces Paige Kimble, who stepped down last year. By contrast, Durnil has spent much of his career leading nonprofit, educational and media orga-

nizations. Most recently, he was president and CEO of the Simon Youth Foundation, an Indianapolis-based nonprofit that aims to help at-risk youth graduate from high school and pursue higher education. He has also held executive positions with the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

Durnil said in an email to The Associated Press that he has a form of dyslexia and spelling was a childhood struggle.

However, he said he took part in math competitions

in high school.

Durnil takes over the bee in a period of transition. Last year's bee was canceled because of the coronavirus pandemic, the first time since World War II that the competition was scrapped. This year's bee will be mostly virtual, with only the final dozen or so spellers competing in person.

That portion of the bee will be held at a new location — an ESPN campus at Walt Disney World in central Florida. The competition has been held for decades in the Washington area. □

Report: U.S. wasted billions on cars, buildings in Afghanistan

By KATHY GANNON

Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — The United States wasted billions of dollars in war-torn Afghanistan on buildings and vehicles that were either abandoned or destroyed, according to a report released Monday by a U.S. government watchdog.

The agency said it reviewed \$7.8 billion spent since 2008 on buildings and vehicles. Only \$343.2 million worth of buildings and vehicles "were maintained in good condition," said the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, or SIGAR, which oversees American taxpayer money spent on the protracted conflict.

The report said that just \$1.2 billion of the \$7.8 billion went to pay for buildings and vehicles that were used as intended.

"The fact that so many capital assets wound up not used, deteriorated or abandoned should have been a major cause of concern for the agencies financing these projects,"



In this Feb. 1, 2021 file photo, birds flyover the city of Kabul, Afghanistan.

John F. Sopko, the special inspector general, said in his report. The U.S. public is weary of the nearly 20-year-old war and President Joe Biden is reviewing a peace deal his predecessor, Donald Trump, signed with the Taliban a year ago. He must decide whether to withdraw all troops by May 1, as promised in the deal, or stay and possibly prolong the war. Officials

say no decision has been made but on Monday, Washington's peace envoy and the American who brokered the U.S.-Taliban deal, Zalmay Khalilzad, was back in the Afghan capital for a tour of the region.

Taliban insurgents and the Afghan government have been holding on-again-off-again talks in the Gulf Arab state of Qatar but a deal that could bring peace to

Afghanistan after 40 years of relentless war seems far off. After Kabul, Khalilzad will travel to Qatar's capital of Doha and neighboring countries, including Pakistan, to push anew for progress in the Doha talks and a cease-fire to end the relentless violence.

Analyst Bill Roggio of the Long War Journal said the findings by SIGAR are not surprising. The reasons for

the financial losses include Taliban attacks, corruption and "throwing money at the problem without considering the implications," he said. "It is one thing to build a clinic and school, it is another to operate, maintain, and in many cases defend this infrastructure from Taliban attacks," said Roggio. "Additionally, the West has wildly underestimated the impact of Afghan corruption and in many cases incompetence. It was always a recipe for failure."

U.S. agencies responsible for construction didn't even ask the Afghans if they wanted or needed the buildings they ordered built, or if they had the technical ability to keep them running, Sopko said in his report.

The waste occurred in violation of "multiple laws stating that U.S. agencies should not construct or procure capital assets until they can show that the benefiting country has the financial and technical resources and capability to use and maintain those assets effectively," he said. □

Associated Press

Huawei daughter back in Canada court in US extradition case

By JIM MORRIS

Associated Press

VANCOUVER, British Columbia (AP) — A senior executive for Chinese communications giant Huawei Technologies was returning to a Canadian courtroom Monday to begin a series of hearings in which her lawyers will argue her extradition to the U.S. should be halted because her rights have been violated.

Canada arrested Meng Wanzhou, the daughter of Huawei's founder and the company's chief financial officer, at Vancouver's airport in late 2018. The U.S. wants her extradited to face fraud charges. Her arrest infuriated Beijing, which sees her case as a political move designed to prevent China's rise.

The U.S. accuses Huawei of using a Hong Kong shell company called Skycom

to sell equipment to Iran in violation of U.S. sanctions. It says Meng, 49, committed fraud by misleading the HSBC bank about the company's business dealings in Iran. Over the next several weeks, Meng's defense team will present several justifications for halting the extradition proceedings. They will argue her arrest was politically motivated and will point to comments made by former U.S. President Donald Trump that he was using Meng as a bargaining chip to force a better trade deal with China. They also will claim an abuse of process, saying Canada Border Services Agency officers detained and questioned Meng without a lawyer, seized her electronic devices and compelled her to give up the passcodes before her official arrest.

Her lawyers also contend the U.S. is exceeding the limits of its jurisdiction by prosecuting a foreign citizen for actions that took place in Hong Kong and that Canada was misled by the U.S. about the strength of its case.

Michael Byers, a University of British Columbia political scientist and former law professor who dealt in extradition law, said the border officers questioning Meng at the airport before she realized she was being arrested could affect the case. "It appears some of those questions were being asked as a result of information requested by the FBI," Byers said. "On its face, that could be a violation of her rights." Canada's attorney general said in court documents that Trump's comments were public statements



Meng Wanzhou, the chief financial officer of Huawei, leaves her home in Vancouver, British Columbia, to attend a court hearing, Monday, March 1, 2021.

Associated Press

by a president no longer in office about a possible intervention that never occurred.

If Supreme Court Associate Chief Justice Heather Holmes rules in Meng's favor on any of the defense arguments, the prosecution will likely appeal.

Meng's arrest has soured relations between Canada and China. In apparent retaliation, China detained former Canadian diplomat

Michael Kovrig and Canadian entrepreneur Michael Spavor. China has also placed restrictions on various Canadian exports to China, including canola oil seed.

China also handed death sentences to four Canadians convicted of drug smuggling. Kovrig and Spavor are remain jailed. Meng remains free on bail in Vancouver and living in a mansion. □

France's Sarkozy convicted of corruption, sentenced to jail

By SYLVIE CORBET

Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — A Paris court found French former President Nicolas Sarkozy guilty of corruption and influence peddling on Monday and sentenced him to a year in prison. He can ask to serve that time at home and also plans to appeal.

The 66-year-old, who was president from 2007 to 2012, was convicted of trying to bribe a magistrate in exchange for information about a legal case in which he was implicated. He will remain free while he appeals, but it was a blow to the retired politician who still plays an influential role in French conservative politics. It's not the end of his legal troubles either: He faces another trial later this month and is also under investigation in a third case. The ruling marks the first time in France's modern history that a former president has been convicted of corruption and given a prison term. His predecessor, Jacques Chirac, was found guilty in 2011 of misuse of public money during his time as Paris mayor not considered a corruption offense and was given a two-year suspended prison sentence.

The court said Sarkozy is entitled to ask to be detained at home with an electronic bracelet — as is the case for any sentence of two years or less. He also



Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy arrives at the courtroom Monday, March 1, 2021 in Paris.
Associated Press

received a two-year suspended sentence which he will not have to serve if he commits no new offense in the next five years.

Later, Sarkozy's lawyer, Jacqueline Laffont, said he would appeal.

Sarkozy's co-defendants his lawyer and longtime friend Thierry Herzog, 65, and now-retired magistrate Gilbert Azibert, 74 were also found guilty and given the same sentence as the politician.

The court found that Sarkozy and his co-defendants sealed a "pact of corruption," based on "consistent and serious evidence".

The court said the case was

"particularly serious" given that the acts were committed by a former president for his personal gain. In addition, as a lawyer by training, Sarkozy was "perfectly aware" that what he was doing was illegal, the court said.

Sarkozy did not deny offering to help Azibert get a job in Monaco but he firmly refuted that he had done anything wrong during the 10-day trial at the end of last year.

Seated on a chair facing the judges and wearing a mask largely hiding his face, Sarkozy showed no reaction when the verdict was read out, and quickly

left the courtroom.

"What insane harassment, my love," his wife Carla Bruni said in a post on Instagram. "The fight goes on, truth will see the light."

The trial focused on phone conversations that took place in February 2014.

At the time, investigative judges had launched an inquiry into the financing of Sarkozy's 2007 presidential campaign. During the investigation, they discovered that Sarkozy and Herzog were communicating via secret mobile phones registered to the alias "Paul Bismuth."

Wiretapped conversations on those phones led pros-

ecutors to suspect Sarkozy and Herzog of promising Azibert a job in Monaco in exchange for leaking information about another legal case involving Sarkozy. In one phone call with Herzog, Sarkozy said of Azibert: "I'll make him move up. ... I'll help him."

In another, Herzog reminded Sarkozy to "say a word" for Azibert during a trip to Monaco.

Azibert never got the Monaco job, and legal proceedings against Sarkozy have been dropped in the case he was seeking information about.

Prosecutors have concluded, however, that the "clearly stated promise" still constitutes corruption under French law, even if the promise wasn't fulfilled.

Laffont, Sarkozy's lawyer, argued the whole case was based on "idle chatter" between a lawyer and his client.

Sarkozy vigorously denied any malicious intention in his offer to help Azibert. He told the court that his political life was all about "giving (people) a little help. That all it is, a little help," he said during the trial.

He also complained that the confidentiality of communications between a lawyer and his client was violated by the wiretaps.

"You have in front of you a man of whom more than 3,700 private conversations have been wiretapped. □

Girl dies after being caned during 'exorcism' in Sri Lanka



Sri Lankan magistrate Wasantha Ramanayake, right and police officers inspect outside a house where a nine year old girl was canned to death in Delgoda, Sri Lanka, Sunday, Feb.28, 2021.

Associated Press

By B. MALLAWARACHI

Associated Press

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (AP)

— Police in Sri Lanka said Monday they have arrested two people in connection with the death of a 9-year-old girl who was repeatedly beaten during a ritual they believed would drive away an evil spirit.

The two suspects — the woman performing the exorcism and the girl's mother — appeared in court on Monday to hear charges over the girl's death, which occurred over the weekend in Delgoda, a small

town about 40 kilometers (25 miles) northeast of the capital, Colombo.

The court ordered the suspects detained until March 12.

According to police spokesperson Ajith Rohana, the mother believed her daughter had been possessed by a demon and took her to the home of the exorcist so a ritual could be performed to drive the spirit away.

Rohana said the exorcist first put oil on the girl and then began to repeatedly hit her with a cane.

When the girl lost consciousness, she was taken to a hospital, where she died.

An autopsy was scheduled for Monday.

The woman who performed the ritual on the girl was known in the area for offering such services in recent months and police were investigating whether anyone else had been abused, Rohana said.

Rohana urged the public to be careful about such services as the girl was not the first to die during such a ritual. □

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Thousands flee rebel violence in Central African Republic

By **ADRIENNE SURPRENANT**
Associated Press

BANGASSOU, Central African Republic (AP) — Monique Moukidje fled her home in Central African Republic's town of Bangassou in January when rebels attacked with heavy weapons, the fighting killing more than a dozen people.

"I ran away because the bullets have no eyes," the 34-year-old said sitting in the shade while waiting for water purification tablets, a tarp, and other supplies to help her in Mbangui-Ngoro, a village where she and hundreds of other displaced people are sheltering.

She is among an estimated 240,000 people displaced in the country since mid-December, according to U.N. relief workers, when



An unidentified woman carries her belongings on her head after crossing the Mbomou river back into Bangassou, Central African Republic, from Ndu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where she had taken refuge, Sunday Feb. 14, 2021.

rebels calling themselves the Coalition of Patriots for Change launched attacks, first to disrupt the Dec. 27

Associated Press
elections and then to de-

stabilize the newly-elected government of President Faustin Archange Touadera. The rebels' fighting has enveloped the country and caused a humanitarian crisis in the already unstable nation.

Hundreds of thousands of people are also left without basic food or health care, and with the main roads between Central African Republic and Cameroon closed for almost two months, prices have skyrocketed leaving families unable to afford food.

"The most pressing needs are on the axis (the main roads)," says Marco Done-da, project coordinator for Doctors Without Borders based in Bangassou, on the country's southeastern border with Congo. □

Ethiopia rebuffs U.S. call to pull outside forces from Tigray

By **RODNEY MUHUMUZA**
Associated Press

KAMPALA, Uganda (AP) — Ethiopia's government is rebuffing calls by the United States to withdraw troops from the embattled Tigray region. In response to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's

call for Ethiopia to immediately withdraw troops from Tigray, Ethiopia's foreign ministry said that it is an issue to be decided by the Addis Ababa government, not a foreign power.

"It should be clear that such matters are the sole responsibility of the Ethio-

pian government," Ethiopia's foreign ministry said in a statement issued Sunday. "The Ethiopian government, like any government of a sovereign nation, has in place various organizing principles in its federal and regional structures which are solely accountable only to the Ethiopian people."

No foreign country should try to "dictate a sovereign nation's internal affairs," said the Ethiopian statement.

Alarm is growing over the fate of Tigray's 6 million people as fierce fighting reportedly continues between Ethiopian and allied forces and those supporting the now-fugitive Tigray leaders who once dominated Ethiopia's government. □

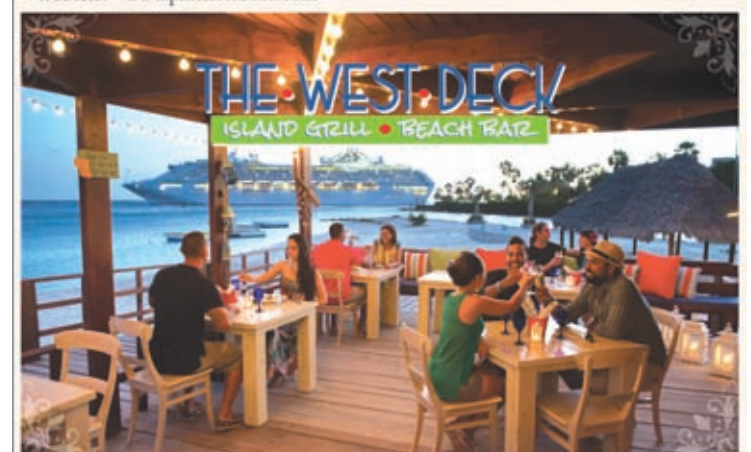


Almaz, 12, braids the hair of Zinabu at a center for people displaced by the recent conflict located in Meseret Primary School in Mekele, the capital of the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia Monday, Feb. 22, 2021.

Associated Press



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Restaurant Taste My Aruba: Sustainable, Sea-to-table Savor

ORANJESTAD — What you see is what you get. These descriptions suit both the restaurant and the owner. Straightforward, honest, pure and local. "Taste My Aruba is all about honest food, it is culture. Quality is my credo and my heart is in this place," says owner Nathaly de Mey, who personally selects the fish caught daily at the port. "We have a different menu every day depending on what the fishermen bring in." Taste My Aruba opened on July 10th, 2018; and this ship has been sailing steadily towards more and more great reviews. If it were not for the food, the enchanting outside terrace would be worth it all.

At Padu Lampe Plaza in the heart of Oranjestad, you will find a renovated monumental building which used to be the governor's mansion. Inside, it is all about local art and crafts, the creative center, Cosecha, is open during the day. At 6 p.m., you will find the most romantically-lit terrace under a canopy of trees with tables set up for you to indulge in delectable food. The most curious thing is this place is so unpretentious.

Ceviche, Lobster Tower, Grouper Fish Cakes and Lobster Bisque are some of the divine starters. Drunken Shrimp Linguini in Creamy Garlic Sauce or Lobster with Truffle Mash will make you happy. The entire menu improves your mood. But don't worry; there are also options for meat lovers.

Sustainable & local

"I buy local out of principle and I stick to that. I wish to support Arubans and by buying 100-300 kg of fish each week I give back to the fishermen and their families," says De Mey. She checks every fish she buys because in her opinion it is important to see how the catch is being handled. "We use everything from the head to the tail. The lobster is boiled and we make a bisque from the head while the tail is used for the Lob-



ster Tower. The Grouper's body and head carry a lot of meat which goes into the fish cakes and the rest is used for the main course. We are fully sustainable." She calls her place a 'boutique fish shack'. Although we cannot agree on that because it is way more. Taste My Aruba is like Aruba's ever-blowing breeze, a fresh and honest surprise and located on a beautiful spot downtown. "Our guests are mainly tourists and



they know how we work. If it's finished, it's finished because what we get from the sea is all we can offer you. The only foreign products I buy are my wild-caught shrimps from Norway and of course beef _ we do not have cows on our tiny island."

Her story

De Mey lived in the United States for 16 years and another 17 years in Dublin, Ireland. "The season in Dublin runs from March to September as after that it gets cold. My birthday is in October so I thought; let me come home to celebrate and I will stay for the cold season in Aruba." She did not leave again. "In Dublin, I ran a culinary business where we would hit various eateries in trendy places during a culinary walk. I started this here too, but everywhere I went the food was standing there forever. Do not get me wrong, I like pastechi but it should not be eaten from a hot box, only fresh." She is firm not to have her food laying around, they make it as you order. "So this place came available and I thought; let me turn it into this posh sandwich shop with everything fresh and all kinds of bread. But it is simply too hot during the day and my kitchen space is only 23 m2." Her clientele were government employees grabbing a sandwich and coffee on their way to work or picking up lunch. It went well but as De Mey says: "To make it half you need to sell 1000 sandwiches at least, I had to make a change." One day she bought seven kilos of fish and prepared it on a George Foreman grill. "This is a historic building, so gas ovens are not allowed, everything needs to be electric. Nevertheless, I sold all the fish in one day, so I kept selling fish." Initially she did it by herself. She woke up every night at 3 a.m. to prepare and carrying foldable tables to her terrace every day. "I had to be here at 7 a.m., when the employees started passing by." Her principle of fresh and local food counted for her sandwiches and salads too. "This is me, my authenticity. I can't do it halfway."

Curious about Taste My Aruba? Make sure to make your reservation for one of the 32 seats. Hours are from 6pm-11pm, Monday through Saturday. Website: <https://tastemyaruba.com/reservations/>. □



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Bartender Gaby Morales Retires with a Toast to his Future Success and New Endeavors

PALM BEACH — The Hilton Aruba Caribbean Resort & Casino hosted an informal gathering in celebration of veteran bartender Gaby Morales, retiring from service after 28 years. Morales was presented with a bouquet of fresh flowers, a letter of appreciation and a gift card at the socially distanced toast to his future success and new endeavors.

The gathering at Mira Solo bar was attended by General Manager Vasco Baselli, Director of Human resources Glenn Farro and resort department heads. Baselli thanked Morales for his years of mixology, creating hundreds of fancy Caribbean cocktails each day, at Mira Solo Bar and at Castaways, home of the resort's signature cocktail, the Aruba Ariba.

Gaby is leaving a legacy

behind, a tropical, frozen, tall drink, the Natural Bridge, a recipe he personally handed over to the next generation. The Natural Bridge, his original creation, was an award winning cocktail at a local mixing competition, made with white Rum, Coconut Cream, Crème de Banane, Poncho Crema with a heart of Blue Curacao – a true crown pleaser. Morales shared he decided the time has come to take a more active part in his 6



grandchildren and 2 great-grandchildren's lives, by spending quality time with them, including off-road biking. Baselli, took advantage of the opportunity to acknowledge Morales' achievements: "I would like to express our sincere gratitude for the hard work and professionalism that you have demonstrated over the past years at our beloved hotel," he said. "Your commitment and dedication have always been an inspiration to your



colleagues, supervisors and managers, who will certainly miss working with you. During your time at our hotel you have lived through many changes and challenges and have always risen to meet them while exceeding guests' expectations. You represent what has always defined this resort, the warmth and genuine hospitality of its Team Members. As you start a new chapter in your life, we congratulate you, and wish to extend a heartfelt

Masha Danki, for a job well done."

Executive Chef Matt Boland put together delicious, individual snack platters pairing them with sparkling wine flutes, as team members shared anecdotes and stories wishing Morales health and longevity, as he starts his exciting adventure of being retired to enjoy the fruits of their labor, and his hobbies. Pictured here snapshots from a memorable afternoon. □

Seagrasses form essential habitats

SANTA CRUZ — All local seagrass species are protected by local law as they form an essential habitat for many marine species in important stages of their life cycles. Seagrass ecosystems are linked to endangered and protected species such as sea turtles and conch. Many fish species that contribute to fisheries also depend on these seagrasses.

Since the placement of the piers at Rodgers Beach, the seagrasses there are

now more exposed to human activity. We encourage all visitors of the seagrass areas to ensure you do not trample or create a lot of water movement that can disturb or harm the seagrasses and their associated species.

FPNA has started investigating the seagrasses in the Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) of Parke Marino Aruba, in collaboration with the University of Aruba to add a practical aspect for second year SISSTEM-students in their

course on Environmental Science. Additionally, there are two interns from Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences working with FPNA to develop a seagrass monitoring program by investigating the current state of the seagrasses to form a baseline.

About Aruba National Park

This beautiful National Park in Aruba comprises almost 20% of the island. Enjoy gorgeous vistas of Aruba's rugged terrain, desert-like



hills filled with tall cacti, a breathtaking coastline and protected local flora and fauna. The National Park takes you on a memorable journey of the islands past offering unique geological, cultural and historical sites. These can all be enjoyed and explored either on your own or during guided tours. A

wide variety of educational and informative programs and fun activities is available. Open daily from 8:00am-4:00pm.

For more information go to <http://www.arubanationalpark.org>. □

Source: Aruba National park Organization



Article by Etnia Nativa

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Etnia Nativa is close to high rise Hotels



Aruba's tourism recovery

Episode XCIV - 94

ORANJESTAD — According to the latest UNWTO data, Caribbean destinations experienced a 67% fall in international tourist arrivals in 2020 compared to the previous year. Aruba seems to have been suffering the most by being 90% dependable on one single economic pillar. Given the reliance of many destinations on the sector, this has placed large numbers of livelihoods and businesses at risk by idling to a stop making timely restart of tourism vital.

This crisis gives us the opportunity to rethink how the tourism sector should be and how tourism can contribute to people and Planet Island. Better rebuild this sector by making it more sustainable, inclusive and resilient. We urgently need all sectors related to tourism to work together to restart this sector for the benefit of all. For this reconstruction, a prominent place must be given for sustainability and innovation.

At this time, as an island nation, we must stand at that point where government, commerce and the general public, must determine our character and make an unconditional choice for the island's future. Tourism is the best hope we have, however highly consider mistakes we made in the past and keep in mind Aruba's geo-physical limitations, in order to guarantee a fair standard of living and a good quality of life. Redefine the product as a destination. Reconsider all assets. Recognize and respect local essences of island's cultural aspects together with all native species and things, since they are running the risk of disappear or becoming extinct as a species. It is in hand of the general public to participate, requesting and demanding proper legislative protection that safeguards and guarantees the existence of our ecosystem's for our next generation. We must create awareness of our, yet unfathomed assets, which could be lost without ever knowing of their existence. Respect and



protect archeological grounds and rock formations. Clean up the house for our own sake.

We listen very encouragingly to visitor's complaints and issues that worries our loyal return travelers, we also consider all warnings of product saturation, loss of friendliness and attention etc. The best of all is that we are very optimistic and that we have high expectan-

cies to which we are positively ready to tackle the challenges ahead, the great once and the less great. The moment to re-educate and relocate locals in to the hospitality service job market is now. Recovery is eminent since many are jobless due to the health situation and work force reduction. □



To get to know a little more regarding Aruba's and its cultural origins we highly recommend you to book your participation in our cultural encounter session.

A mind opening revelation and entertaining island experience.

Mail us at etnianativa03@gmail.com, our facilities and activities take place close to high rise hotels.

Aruba to me

ORANJESTAD — You are back and we would like to portrait you! By inviting you to send us your favorite vacation picture while enjoying our Happy Island.

Complete the sentence: Aruba to me is Send your picture with that text (including your name and where you are from) to: news@arubatoday.com and we will publish your vacation memory. Isn't that a special way to keep your best moments alive? Please do note: By submitting photos, text or any other materials, you give permission to The Aruba Today Newspaper, Caribbean Speed Printers and any of its affiliated companies to use said materials, as well as names, likeness, etc. for promotional purposes without compensation.

Last but not least: check out our website, Instagram and Facebook page! Thank you for supporting our free newspaper, we strive to make you a happy reader every day again.

For today we received an extraordinary story from **Don and Nancy Dieker** from Lake Mary, Florida. They wrote:

"My first time to visit Aruba was with my parents in 1963 when I was thirteen years old. I fell in love with Aruba immediately. My father taught me how to drive on that vacation trip.

My wife and I, have visited Aruba nine times in the last five years as we have retired. I was a corporate lawyer and my wife was a social worker for Hospice and retirement has given us the opportunity to visit our favorite place. We have been so sad and thinking of the people of Aruba during the Covid virus and how it has impacted the island. We have tried for the last fifteen months to visit again but circumstances have not allowed us. We are so excited about visiting again for the week of March 16th, 2021 and look forward



to spending time on the Happy Island.

We love the natural beauty of the desert and the ocean all on one island but why we will always come back is because of the friendliness, kindness, and spirit of the people of Aruba." □

Liz Weston: Worry about the right thing with estate taxes

By **LIZ WESTON** of NerdWallet

Death and taxes may be the only certainties in life, but death taxes are only a remote possibility for most people. The vast majority of Americans won't ever have or give away enough to owe estate or gift taxes. Far more people could be affected if a tax break that benefits heirs is eliminated. While campaigning for president, Joe Biden proposed doing away with something called the "step-up in basis" that allows people to minimize or avoid capital gains taxes on inherited assets. But no legislation has been proposed yet, and such a change could have a tough time getting approved by a divided Congress.

"Right now, we're telling folks to start thinking about this stuff, but we're not rushing out to take action," says certified financial planner Colleen Carcone, a director of wealth planning strategies at TIAA.

HOW STEP-UP IN BASIS LOWERS TAXES

Although most estates don't owe estate taxes, anyone who's inherited a house, stock or other property has likely benefited from the step-up tax break that gives such assets a new value at the owner's death.

Say your savvy aunt paid



This undated file photo provided by NerdWallet shows Liz Weston, a columnist for personal finance website NerdWallet.com.

(NerdWallet via Associated Press)

\$7,000 for a single share of Berkshire Hathaway stock in 1990. That's her tax basis. If she sold the stock for its closing price of \$362,000 on Feb. 10, she would owe tax on the \$355,000 gain. If she generously gave you the stock and you sold it on Feb. 10, you'd owe the same amount of tax because you'd also get her tax basis.

Now, let's say that instead of giving you the stock, she left it to you in her will and she died Feb. 10. The stock would get a new basis for tax purposes of \$362,000. All the gain that occurred during her lifetime would never be taxed. If you sold the stock later, you would owe tax only on the gain since her death.

Some kinds of inheritances,

such as annuities or retirement accounts, don't get the step-up. But it's no exaggeration to say that far more people benefit from our estate tax system by inheriting homes and other assets with a stepped-up tax basis — than have to pay any estate taxes.

WHO PAYS GIFT AND ESTATE TAXES NOW

This year, an estate has to be worth more than \$11.7 million to trigger federal estate taxes. Less than 0.1 percent of the people who died in the U.S. last year were expected to leave estates large enough to owe any tax, according to the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center.

People who have to pay gift taxes are pretty rare as well. There's an annual exclusion, or an amount you can give away to as many people as you want each year without having to file a gift tax return. The exclusion limit is \$15,000 for 2021 you can give up to \$15,000 each to an unlimited number of people without having to report the gifts. Even if you do have to file a gift tax return, you wouldn't actually owe gift taxes until the amount you gave away in your lifetime over and above the annual exclusion amounts totaled more than \$11.7 million.

These historically high limits are scheduled to end in

2025, which means in 2026 the estate and gift tax exemption limits would revert to \$5 million per person, adjusted for inflation. Biden wants the exemption to drop to \$3.5 million per person.

People in some states already face lower limits. The 12 states that impose their own estate taxes Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and Washington — and the District of Columbia have lower exemption limits than the feds. Massachusetts and Oregon have the lowest exemption amounts, \$1 million.

while distant relations and nonrelatives pay more.

WHAT YOU SHOULD DO NOW: KEEP GOOD RECORDS

The idea of eliminating the step-up in basis has been proposed in the past, but it faced headwinds in part because the practice benefits a wide range of voters. Since there's no concrete proposal to change the step-up, there's not much people can do to prepare for change other than what they should be doing anyway, which is keeping careful records. That means "tracking the basis" of what they paid for any assets as part of routine estate planning. □

Democratic senators propose clean energy tax credits



Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., speaks during a Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources hearing on the nomination of Rep. Debra Haaland, D-N.M., to be Secretary of the Interior on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, Feb. 24, 2021.

Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — Two U.S. senators from states with declining manufacturing sectors are pushing to invest \$8 billion through tax credits to create clean energy jobs. U.S. Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Debbie Stabenow of Michigan unveiled legislation Monday that aims to help rural communities that have lost jobs in the coal and fossil fuel industries.

The proposal is meant to incentivize companies producing batteries, electric and fuel cell vehicles, semiconductor chips and other renewable energy technologies.

The two Democrats said it would aim to uplift Appalachia, where the decline of coal has devastated local economies, and other parts of the country where manufacturing has declined. Half of the \$8 billion would go to communities where coal mines have closed or coal power plants have shuttered. The other half would target the auto industry, Manchin said.

"This is basically what we need for people to make the investments so that people can have good jobs in the area where they want to live," Manchin said.

The bill is similar to a 2009 tax credit Stabenow authored to help the manufacturing sector recover from the Great Recession. She said the new proposal would help produce parts and technologies necessary for a clean energy supply chain.

"We don't have to be counting on it coming from overseas. We don't have to have China doing the majority of the solar panels, or the majority of the batteries," she said in a Zoom news conference with Manchin. "We can do that here. And these are great paying jobs, they are union jobs." □

Monarch butterflies down 26% in Mexico wintering grounds

By **MARK STEVENSON**

Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — The number of monarch butterflies that showed up at their winter resting grounds in central Mexico decreased by about 26% this year, and four times as many trees were lost to illegal logging, drought and other causes, making 2020 a bad year for the butterflies.

The government commission for natural protected areas said the butterflies' population covered only 2.1 hectares (5.2 acres) in 2020, compared to 2.8 hectares (6.9 acres) the previous year and about one-third of the 6.05 hectares (14.95 acres) detected in 2018.

Because the monarchs cluster so densely in pine and fir trees, it is easier to count them by area rather than by individuals.

Gloria Tavera, the regional director of Mexico's Commission for National Protected Areas, blamed the drop on "extreme climate conditions," the loss of milkweed habitat in the United States and Canada on which butterflies depend, and deforestation in the butterflies' wintering grounds in Mexico.

Illegal logging in the monarchs wintering grounds rose to almost 13.4 hectares (33 acres), a huge increase from the 0.43 hectare (1 acre) lost to logging last year.



This Aug. 19, 2015, file photo, shows a monarch butterfly in Vista, Calif.

Jorge Rickards of the WWF environmental group acknowledged the lost trees were a blow, but said "the logging is very localized" in three or four of the mountain communities that make up the butterfly reserve.

In addition, wind storms, drought and the felling of trees that had fallen victim to pine beetles or disease, caused the loss of another 6.9 hectares (17 acres) in the reserve, bringing the total forest loss in 2020 to 20.65 hectares (51 acres). That compares to an overall loss of about 5 hectares (12.3 acres) from all causes the previous year.

Tavera said the drought was affecting the butterflies themselves, as well as the pine and fir trees where the clump together for warmth.

"The severe drought we

are experiencing is having effects," Tavera said. "All the forests in the reserve are under water stress, the forests are dry."

"The butterflies are looking for water on the lower slopes, near the houses," she noted.

Tavera also expressed concern about the severe winter storms in Texas, which the butterflies will have to cross — and feed and lay their eggs — on their way back to their northern summer homes in coming months.

"This is a cause for worry," Tavera said, referring to whether the monarchs will find enough food and habitat after the winter freeze. It was also a bad year for the mountain farming

communities that depend for part of their income on tourists who visit the reserves. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, visits fell from around 490,000 last year, to just 80,000 in the 2020-2021 season.

Environmentalist and writer Homero Aridjis, who grew up around the reserve, said the decline in butterflies and rise in logging was not surprising, given the reduction in Mexican government funding for protected natural areas and environmental work.

"While the reserves were closed to tourism during practically the whole (winter) season, the way was open for loggers, with no control," Aridjis said. "The question is, can the monarch migration survive this environmental negligence?"

The U.S. group Center for Food Safety called for the monarchs to be granted endangered species protection, noting "the minimum population threshold needed to be out of the danger zone of extinction is six hectares."

It was unclear whether the drop in tourism income contributed to the increased logging. Rickards said there has long been pressure on the area's for-

ests from people who want to open land for planting crops.

Felipe Martínez Meza, director of the butterfly reserve, said there have been attempts to plant orchards of avocados — hugely profitable crop for farmers in the area — in the buffer zones around the reserve.

The high mountain peaks where the butterflies clump in trees are probably a bit above the altitude where avocado trees like to grow, Martínez Meza said. But the buffer zones provide protection and support for the higher areas, and he said more must be done to combat the change in land use.

Frequently, illegal logging is carried out by outsiders or organized gangs, and not by the farm communities that technically own the land.

Millions of monarchs migrate from the U.S. and Canada each year to forests west of Mexico's capital. The butterflies hit a low of just 0.67 hectares (1.66 acres) in 2013-2014.

Loss of habitat, especially the milkweed where the monarchs lay their eggs, pesticide and herbicide use, as well climate change, all pose threats to the species' migration. □

Conceptis Sudoku

By Dave Green

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Difficulty Level ★★

3/02

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Mexico may reduce protection area for endangered porpoise



In this Feb. 17, 2018 file photo, an activist carries a vaquita porpoise skull on a conch as activists and artists during a procession for the critically endangered vaquita porpoise in Mexico City.

Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — The Mexican government said

Saturday it is considering reducing the protection

area for the vaquita marina in the upper Gulf of California, an apparent admission that the tiny porpoise may never return to the entire historic range of its habitat.

Mexico's Environment Department said Saturday that the drop in the number of vaquitas and the area where they have been seen in recent years justifies reducing the protection zone, which currently covers most of the upper Gulf. The zone starts around the Colorado river delta and extends south past the fishing town of San Felipe and near Puerto Peñasco. □

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With pride and respect, Cynthia Erivo takes on Queen of Soul

By MESFIN FEKADU

AP Music Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Tony Awards could bring Cynthia Erivo another Emmy. Days after the British performer belted Aretha Franklin's "Ain't No Way" during a red carpet interview at the 2019 Tonys — explaining that it's her guilty pleasure song — she got a call from the producers of the National Geographic series "Genius: Aretha."

"I was like, 'I beg your pardon,'" she continued. "In my head I'm like, 'There is another film happening and I'm excited to see that, so what is this?'"

NatGeo had already completed series on Albert Einstein and Pablo Picasso, and wanted to focus on the life of Franklin, who died 2018 and was arguably the greatest singer of all time.

When Erivo, 34, went to meet with the producers, she had a bit of an epiphany.

"Nothing else was playing in the hotel, it was just mood music," she said. "All of a sudden 'Day Dreaming' comes on as I go to sit down. I'm like, 'Am I the only one that noticed that?'"

Laughing with a huge smile on her face, she continued: "I was like, 'Either you planned that or someone's trying to tell me something.'"

Fast forward two years and Erivo is playing the Queen of Soul in the eight-episode series debuting March 21. "Respect," a film about Franklin starring Jennifer Hudson, will be released in



In this combination photo, actress Cynthia Erivo portrays Aretha Franklin in the National Geographic miniseries "Genius: Aretha," left, and Aretha Franklin holds her Grammy Award for Best Rhythm and Blue performance of the song "Bridge Over Troubled Waters," in New York on March 13, 1972. Associated Press

August.

In an interview with The Associated Press, edited for clarity and brevity, the Tony, Emmy and Grammy winner talked about meeting Franklin, playing icons on-screen and more.

AP: What does Aretha mean to you?

ERIVO: She means the world to me. As a singer, I truly believe that my job is to communicate and tell the stories that sometimes are difficult for people to tell for themselves ... Aretha did that with her eyes closed. She had a wonderful way of communicating the things that she had been through, through song.

AP: She has this thing by which she can take some-

one else's song and make it her own.

ERIVO: Totally and it's such a special thing. Not only does she take the song and make it her own, she takes the song and you forget it was someone else's. That to me, it's a really special thing that she was able to do. I don't know that people realize that "Respect" wasn't her song first.

She finds messaging in songs, in music that you didn't realize were there in the first place. I don't know how, but she always managed to find a way into a song that you didn't know existed. I know that this might not be a popular opinion but when she did her version of (Adele's) "Rolling in the Deep," I was

like, "Huh, never heard this song like this before. Didn't think about this song like this before." At that point because she was an older woman singing this song, you're like, all the experience that this person must have gone through to get to this point, I didn't hear this before. Now I'm hearing it with her voice. She was one of a kind, truly.

AP: Did you get a chance to meet her?

ERIVO: I met her the first time when she'd come to a performance of "The Color Purple." I didn't know she was there. When I saw her, I felt like an idiot because I was just in shock. There is Miss Aretha Franklin standing in front of me and I've just finished singing a

show in her presence, oh my goodness. How do I do this? She was funny and lovely. She sang the last line of "I'm Here" back to me. That was a moment I had to put my heart back together. I was like, "This is happening for real." She was wonderful. When you meet someone like that, you don't think they'll remember your face. I met her again at the Kennedy Center Honors. I was singing the very first time I did it. She remembered me. She said, "You're the girl who was in that play. You can sing. You can sing." I was like, "Yes that's me. Thank you very much." I remember she was wearing red. My favorite thing about that day was when I saw the recording of it, when it finally aired, during my performance they pan to Aretha and she's singing along with her eyes closed.

AP: How do you feel about the people who say, "Cynthia doesn't really look like Aretha?"

ERIVO: No, in the same way that Diana Ross didn't really look like Billie Holiday, but she did an incredible, incredible job when she did "Lady Sings the Blues." ... I don't think anyone does look like Aretha. If you found someone who looks like Aretha who couldn't do the work, who can't sing the songs, then that's where you have a problem. I'd rather someone that doesn't look like her but can give me the essence.

AP: Are you excited to see the Jennifer Hudson version?

ERIVO: I am. I know that they were close, and I know that they had a conversation. This is something she had been dreaming of doing. I am excited to see it. □

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Difficulty Level ★★ 3/02



Irv Cross poses at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn., in this April 8, 1999, file photo.

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Irv Cross, the former NFL defensive back who became the first Black man to work full-

Irv Cross, NFL player, pioneer Black analyst, dies at 81

time as a sports analyst on national television, died Sunday. He was 81. The Philadelphia Eagles, the team Cross spent six of his nine NFL seasons with, said Cross' son, Matthew, confirmed his father died near his home in Roseville, Minnesota. The cause of death was not provided.

"All of us at CBS Sports are saddened by the news of Irv Cross' passing," CBS Sports Chairman Sean McManus said in a statement. "Irv was a pioneer who made signifi-

cant contributions to the storied history and tradition of CBS Sports and, along with Phyllis George and Brent Musburger, set the standard for NFL pregame shows with 'The NFL Today.' He was a true gentleman and a trail blazer in the sports television industry and will be remembered for his accomplishments and the paths he paved for those who followed." From Hammond, Indiana, Cross starred in football and track and field at Northwestern. □

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As Tokyo nears, the plans for USA Basketball continue

By **TIM REYNOLDS**
AP Basketball Writer

MIAMI (AP) — Atlanta coach and USA Basketball men's national team assistant coach Lloyd Pierce had a one-day coronavirus scare a few weeks ago and had to stay in his hotel room while the matter was sorted out.

The bad news: He missed practice.

The good news: He didn't have to miss a USA Basketball staff call that head coach Gregg Popovich had scheduled for that day, because it would have conflicted with that practice.

"This is how smart Pop is," Pierce said.

If the rest of the plan comes together as well as that day did, USA Basketball will be very happy this summer. The start of the team's training camp in Las Vegas is now about four months away — July 1 is a target date, though not absolutely finalized — meaning the decisions on who will play for the Americans at the rescheduled Tokyo Olympics are getting closer and

closer.

The Americans are expected to have about 60 players in the pool of Olympic prospects for this summer, then will pare that down significantly before bringing a team to Las Vegas. Assuming schedules do not change, that camp would begin during the NBA conference finals and with four teams still playing — meaning it's a safe bet that some players USA Basketball will want for Tokyo might otherwise be busy at that time.

That's why this Olympic selection process is going to have to be different than usual for the Americans, and multiple contingency plans must be mapped out. Some of the questions that the USA Basketball coaches — Popovich's staff also includes Golden State coach Steve Kerr and Villanova's Jay Wright — and staff are currently mulling included these, as Pierce recalled Sunday in Miami before his Hawks faced the Heat:

"Who do you wait for? Who's worth waiting for? How long do you wait?

How do you manage your roster because we're going to play four or five games in July in Vegas, kind of a mini-bubble of teams and just kind of keep everything there? And how do you manage a roster, knowing there may be some pretty important guys potentially that may still be playing. And then, what do you do in the event of some random emergency when you have to leave on the 19th for Tokyo?"

Most of the league's biggest American stars — LeBron James, Stephen Curry, Damian Lillard, James Harden, Jimmy Butler, Kyle Lowry, Kyrie Irving and Kevin Durant among them — were part of the player pool last year and are expected to be part of the pool this summer.

Pierce, Kerr and Wright were all with Popovich as assistants when USA Basketball finished seventh at the Basketball World Cup in 2019. More than 50 players were part of the U.S. plan at one point or another for that tournament; of those, 12 went to China,



San Antonio Spurs coach Gregg Popovich directs players during the first half of an NBA basketball game against the New Orleans Pelicans in San Antonio, Saturday, Feb. 27, 2021.

Associated Press

two got cut after the first week of training camp and the other three dozen or so dropped out on their own. "There's only so much to discuss," Kerr said. "We talked about roster possibilities and that sort of thing, and logistics. And the logistics are kind of up in the air, so we'll just play it by ear — and when the time comes, we'll be ready to go to work." Pierce said the U.S. is trying to simultaneously be pre-emptive and proactive when it comes to figuring out how this summer might

work in terms of personnel. "We haven't talked about style of play and things like that," Pierce said. "I think there's a lot of other factors that are really important right now leading into that."

The U.S. men will open the Olympics against France — the team that beat them in the World Cup quarterfinals and ended their medal hopes in that event — on July 25. The U.S. men will also face Iran on July 28 and a still-to-be-determined team on July 31. □

Djokovic ties Federer in weeks at No. 1; Gauff up to No. 38

By **HOWARD FENDRICH**
AP Tennis Writer

Novak Djokovic is gaining on Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal in the Grand Slam standings, and he's already caught Federer in another significant statistic: As of Monday, Djokovic has been No. 1 in the ATP rankings for a total of 310 weeks. That equals Federer's career record for most time spent atop the rankings. And no matter what happens over the next week, Djokovic is assured of breaking Federer's mark

on March 8. Pete Sampras is third on the list, with 286 weeks. Djokovic's Australian Open championship last month gave the 33-year-old from Serbia 18 Grand Slam singles trophies. Only Federer and Nadal, each with 20, have more.

Getting to that milestone for No. 1 weeks is "going to be a relief for me, because I'm going to focus all my attention on Slams, mostly," Djokovic said after beating Daniil Medvedev in the final at Melbourne Park. "When you are going for No. 1

rankings, you kind of have to be playing the entire season, and you have to be playing well; you have to play all the tournaments. My goals will adapt and will shift a little bit."

There was no movement in the ATP's Top 10 on Monday. But if current No. 3 Medvedev reaches the final at the hard-court tournament in Rotterdam, Netherlands, that concludes Sunday, he would overtake Nadal and move up to a career-high No. 2. That would make Medve-



Serbia's Novak Djokovic poses for photos with the Norman Brookes Challenge Cup at Brighton Beach after defeating Russia's Daniil Medvedev on Sunday Feb. 21, 2021 in the men's singles final at the Australian Open tennis championship in Melbourne, Australia, Monday, Feb. 22, 2021.

Associated Press

dev the first man other than Federer, Nadal, Djokovic or Andy Murray to be first or second since Interna-

tional Tennis Hall of Fame electee Lleyton Hewitt was No. 2 behind Federer in July 2005. □

Cardinals agree to terms with free agent edge rusher JJ Watt

By **BARRY WILNER** and **DAVID BRANDT**
AP Sports Writers

TEMPE, Ariz. (AP) — J.J. Watt has agreed to a two-year contract with the Arizona Cardinals, showing that the franchise will be aggressive once again in their push to snap a five-year playoff drought.

The team announced the deal with the free-agent edge rusher on Monday. Watt was released last month by the Houston Texans, for whom he won three NFL Defensive Player of the Year awards.

A person familiar with the contract told The Associated Press that the total package is worth \$31 million. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because the team did not reveal any terms.

A five-time All-Pro, Watt — who turns 32 in three weeks — has been one of the NFL's best players for a decade, but asked out in Houston, which is undergoing a roster upheaval. Watt joins another former Texans star, wide receiver DeAndre Hopkins, in Arizona. Hopkins was acquired by the Cardinals in a one-sided trade a year ago.

Watt had one year remaining on a six-year, \$100 million contract with the Texans.



Houston Texans defensive end J.J. Watt (99) celebrates during the second half of an NFL wild-card playoff football game against the Buffalo Bills in Houston, in this Saturday, Jan. 4, 2020, file photo. Associated Press

Watt's signing is an indication that the Cardinals are willing to spend money in their effort to return to the playoffs for the first time since 2015. They finished with an 8-8 record in 2020, losing five of their last seven games to fall just short of the postseason.

Defensive coordinator Vance Joseph can now add Watt to a group that already has veteran edge rusher Chandler Jones, who had 19 sacks in 2019 before his 2020 season was cut short by a biceps injury. The

Cardinals also have young playmakers such as linebacker Isaiah Simmons and Pro Bowl safety Budda Baker. Hopkins foreshadowed Watt's arrival in the desert a few weeks ago on Instagram, when he posted a picture of the two players, including Watt in a photo-shopped Cardinals jersey with the message "Let's finish what we started ..."

Watt's arrival will certainly ratchet up the pressure on third-year Cardinals coach Kliff Kingsbury, who wasn't quite able to push Arizona

into the postseason in 2020. Kingsbury's known for his offensive acumen — and was brought to mentor 2019 No. 1 overall pick quarterback Kyler Murray — but now the defense might be just as important to the Cardinals' success.

Though he has been plagued by injuries in recent years, Watt started all 128 games in which he appeared in the past 10 years after entering the league as Houston's first-round selection, 11th overall, in the 2011 draft out of Wisconsin.

In 2017, he was selected as the Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year for his work in helping Houston recover from Hurricane Harvey. Watt, who long has been lauded for his humanitarian efforts, helped raise more than \$40 million in hurricane relief in 2017.

He was the league's top defensive player in 2012, 2014 and 2015. Then injuries began to slow him. He appeared in only three games in 2016 and five the next season, sidelined by back problems and then a broken leg. In 2019, Watt missed half of the schedule with a torn pectoral muscle. He returned to play the entire 2020 season and was effective, though not dominant.

So the Cardinals likely are not getting a vintage Watt, the only player in NFL history with 20 or more sacks and 10 or more passes defended in a single season, doing it in both 2012 and 2014. He's tied for fifth among defensive lineman in league history with six touchdowns in the regular season, including three TD catches. He has 101 career sacks, and over the past decade leads the league in tackles for losses (172), quarterback hits (281), multi-sack games (26) and sack yards (713 1-2). □

Whoa, Nelly! Korda makes it 2 straight wins for her family



Nelly Korda celebrates with the winner's trophy after the final round of the Gainbridge LPGA golf tournament Sunday, Feb. 28, 2021, in Orlando, Fla.

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — Jessica Korda opened the LPGA Tour season last month by winning the Tournament of

Champions. On Sunday, it was Nelly's turn. Nelly Korda followed in

big sister's footsteps with a three-shot victory that looked easier than it felt. She seized control with three birdies through six holes, closed with 12 pars and shot a 3-under 69 at Lake Nona to win the Gainbridge LPGA.

"Yeah, Jess' win, I was like, 'OK, I got to get one now,'" Korda said. "We were close that one year. She won in Thailand and I was leading in Singapore. But it's nice to get back-to-back Korda wins now."

More than just matching her sister, Korda won for the first time on American soil. The other three victories for 22-year-old Nelly were in Australia and twice in Taiwan. It also was the first

time she won with her parents watching. Her father, Petr Korda, is a former Australian Open tennis champion.

"I've had an amazing week and I made some clutch putts when I needed to and pulled it off," Korda said.

On the other side of the course, Annika Sorenstam wrapped up her return after more than 12 years of retirement with a par on the ninth hole for a 76, finishing last among the 74 players who made the cut. The 50-year-old Swede was making this one-time appearance because Lake Nona has been her home course for two decades.

"I'm just thankful being

here, playing here and being able to make the cut," Sorenstam said. "I think I never gave up, even though it was not really going my way and I wasn't hitting as well as I should be to be out here. The purpose was to get some tournament rounds, and I did that."

She has said she plans to play the U.S. Senior Women's Open this summer and she'll need to get sharp, though Sorenstam said preparing for that would not include another LPGA event. "I have so much respect for these players," she said. Sorenstam finished 29 shots behind Korda, who won by three over Lexi Thompson and Lydia Ko. □